

## **PRESENTING THE PAST WITH SOME HELP FROM THE FUTURE**

### **New technology in the service of the 3rd millennium museum**

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#### **KEYNOTE ADDRESS – SUMMARY**

Museums are, by definition, conservative. After all, they need to be – their function is to preserve, protect and display the past through its material culture, objects and artefacts. For many years, indeed for almost two centuries, Museums have not radically changed. Now they are changing, and they must.

The change is forced upon the museum community by the advances of the virtual world surrounding us all. The material museum can, at best, display a tiny amount of its holdings, with the rest being kept in underground vaults. Over the last couple of decades, many of the leading museums have moved away from an unchanging display concentrating on a permanent collection, to many rolling exhibitions, which make use of more and more of the material buried in the vaults; however, even this does not do justice to the great majority of the holding in a large and complex museum such as the Louvre, BM, V&A, or the Prado.

Some museums have responded to this innovatively, by displaying all their wares in a new and exciting configuration: consider for example the Rietberg Museum in Zurich, which has put ALL its holdings on display, by rearranging the vaults as a display area, with glass partitions, allowing us uninterrupted and intimate contact and proximity with the objects, in what it calls Visible Storage. This is a solution which more museums are now following, mainly of small to medium size, as it cannot easily provide an answer for the large international museums.

This difficulty is now being faced with a new and exciting solution – the virtual museum. Most museums are now starting, or are preparing, the full digitisation of their collection. This process is to last decades in some cases, and is a complex and expensive one, requiring highly-trained personnel, high-end software and hardware, and an approach to new technology radically different from the past.

The process of mass digitisation is not a simple process of putting information on massive servers. What is required is a new level of technological synchronisation between museums, so that the various systems can talk to each others across the global network. In the wake of Dublin Core, we now need a Visual Dublin Core, allowing all museums to share data across the web, with agreed data formats, procedures and handshakes. This will enable the most important features which such a system must

offer, apart from keeping records: It must be a global data system, and it must be easily searchable on a number of levels: textual, visual, auditory and metadata. Only such a combination of features will allow the system a future, making it distinctly different from the early digitisation efforts, where thinking was limited to preservation, and the needs of display, data exchange and research were not paramount.

To be able to develop such a system, one is looking for a level of cooperation between museums and archives much greater than currently exists. It will take the leading museums to pioneer a common approach, and bring the rest with them. To deliver the task, a large multi-national research effort is required, bringing together expertise in the various areas of computing, art history, media, film, photography, audio and web technologies, as well as software and hardware engineering of the kind not yet in existence, but under active development. The lecture will be arguing the case for such an international effort, building on existing expertise and experience within the academic community in the UK and abroad.

## **BIOGRAPHY**

Professor Haim Bresheeth is a filmmaker, photographer and a film studies scholar, at University of East London since early 2002. His books include the best-selling *Introduction to the Holocaust* (with Stuart Hood, 2 reprints since 1997), the first version was titled *Holocaust for Beginners* (1993) and was reprinted a number of times; This title was also published in Turkish and Croatian translations, and is being translated into other languages. His edited volumes include *The Gulf War and the New World Order*, (with Nira Yuval-Davis) published in 1992 by Zed Books, *Cinema and Memory: Dangerous Liaisons*, Co-edited with Sand, S and Zimmerman, M Jerusalem, Zalman Shazar Centre (Hebrew) 2004, and a special double-issue of *Third Text*, (September, 2006), on Palestinian and Israeli Art, Photography, Architecture and Cinema (co-edited with Haifa Hammami). He has been on the Editorial Board of the Journal *Khamsin* for many years until its demise in 1991, and has published widely in Hebrew and English on Palestinian and Israeli film, and is currently working on the representation of the *other* and *stranger* in European film. His films include the widely-shown *State of Danger* (1989, BBC2) – a documentary on the first Palestinian *Intifada*. He has also written many newspaper articles in Hebrew, mainly published in the Israeli Ha'aretz broadsheet, as well as English language articles, mainly published by the Cairo-based Al-Ahram Weekly. He is Director of the new UEL research centre – Matrix East Research Lab – concentrating on the Digital Arts and Cybercultures.